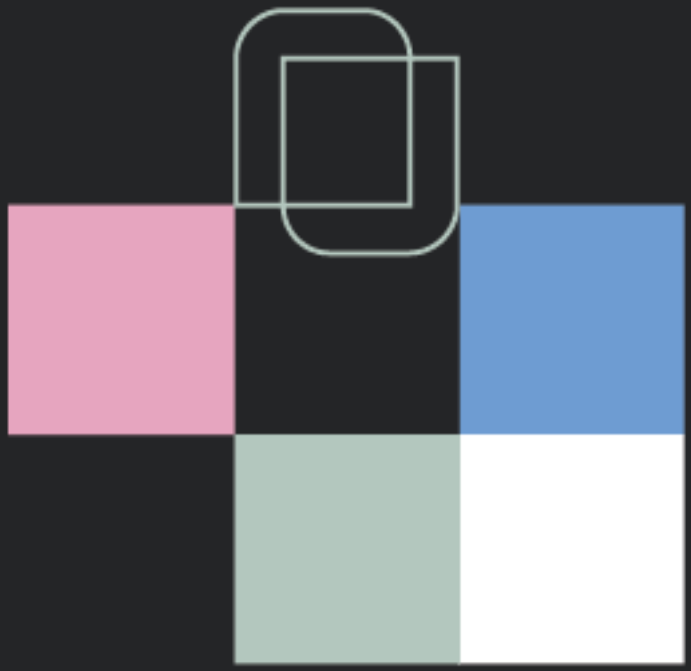
OPEN HORIZONS

Guidelines for applicants:

Open Call #3

Prepared by: SPLORO



OPENING: 02 March 2026

CLOSING: 19 of May 2026 at 17:00* CEST (Brussels time)

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- 1st Info Day: Wednesday 18 March, 2026, 10:00 CET (Brussels time)
- 2nd Info Day: 16 April 2026, 16:00 CEST (Brussels time)

Project Website: https://www.openhorizonsproject.eu/

Apply: https://tinyurl.com/open-horizons-oc3

Disclaimer

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Table of contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Table 1: Open Horizons Acronyms

ACRONYMS	
EC	European Commission
FIF	Financial Identification Form
FSTP	Financial Support to Third Parties
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
OC	Open Call
PIC	Participant Identification Code
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprise
VAT	Value Added Tax
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AR	Augmented Reality
ATEX	ATmosphere EXplosible
CAE	Computer-aided engineering
CDP	Carbon Disclosure Project
GRI	Global Reporting Initiative
IoT	Internet of things
IP	Intellectual Property
IT	Information technology
ERP	Enterprise Resource Planning
ESG	Environmental, Social, and Governance
MBR	Membrane Bioreactor
MES	Manufacturing Execution System
MoM	Method of Moments
ML	Machine Learning
NF	Nanofiltration

NFC	Near Field Communications
OT	Operational Technology
PoC	Proof of Concept
RFID	Radio-frequency identification
RO	Reverse Osmosis
SOC	Security Operations Center
UF	Ultrafiltration

1. Open Horizons project

Open Horizons, funded by the European Union through its Horizon Europe Research and Innovation programme, connects leading corporations with high-potential, women-led digital and deep-tech startups through an open innovation process. Despite the sector's rapid growth, women entrepreneurs continue to face systemic barriers that limit their ability to scale. These challenges include restricted access to funding, scarce industrial partnerships, and difficulty validating their solutions in real-world settings. Many women-led digital and deep-tech startups struggle to secure their first corporate clients, a crucial step for establishing credibility and unlocking further investment opportunities. By facilitating direct collaboration, Open Horizons enables corporates to act as first customers, helping startups gain market traction while offering businesses early access to cutting-edge innovations.

The programme follows a structured, results-driven, two-phase approach. In the initial development phase, selected startups work on tailored solutions to corporate-defined challenges, refining their technology to align with real industry needs. This phase provides financial support, mentorship, and expert guidance to ensure feasibility and market readiness. The programme then moves into a five-month piloting phase, where startups execute the agreed-upon pilot project in collaboration with their corporate partner. Throughout this period, participants benefit from continuous mentorship, industry networking, and exposure to potential investors, strengthening their position in the market.

Open Horizons is a 26-month project which started on February 1st, 2025, and is designed to accelerate the growth of women-led deep-tech companies by facilitating collaboration and providing substantial financial backing. The project will provide €1.2 million in funding for startups.

By fostering corporate-startup collaboration, Open Horizons not only accelerates the growth of women-led businesses but also strengthens corporate open innovation strategies. This model allows businesses to integrate breakthrough technologies into their processes while supporting the next generation of female entrepreneurs. The initiative ultimately contributes to a more inclusive, diverse, and dynamic deep-tech ecosystem, ensuring that the talent and ingenuity of women entrepreneurs drive the future of innovation.

PEDAL, SPLORO, INNOVX, and MIGROS, together with associated corporates, will run this initiative, creating a unique framework where businesses and startups collaborate to foster open innovation, drive industry transformation, and promote gender diversity in deep-tech entrepreneurship.

1.1 Open Horizons Open Call 3 (OC#3) relevant dates

The purpose of Open Horizons Open Calls is to identify and select promising **women-led**, **digital and deep-tech startups in Europe, specifically at the early stages**, offering them a unique opportunity to participate in a tailored open innovation programme. Designed to upscale the capabilities of innovative startups, the programme provides structured pathways to access significant investment and growth opportunities. The overarching goal of Open Call #3 (OC#3) is to support the development and enhance the investment potential of these startups, helping them scale their solutions and create long-term impact within the deep-tech ecosystem.

- 3rd Open Call launch: **02 March 2026**
- Open Call support channel: oh@sploro.eu
- Deadline for submission: **19 May 2026, 17:00* CEST (Brussels time)**
- Evaluation of proposals: **May-August 2026**
- Remote interviews: **August 2026**

- Communication of results to applicants: **August 2026**
- Legal validation and sub-grant agreement preparation: **August 2026**
- Start of the programme: September **2026**

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1.2 Rules and Conditions

Eligible Beneficiaries

Open Horizons focuses on supporting **women-led**, **digital and deep-tech startups in Europe, specifically in the early stages**. This section outlines specific criteria and conditions, establishing eligibility for potential beneficiaries.

Here are the key definitions that guide the selection of beneficiaries:

1. Established country: the applicant must be established in an EU Member State or Horizon Europe Associated Country.

- **Member States:** Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden.
- **Horizon Europe Associated Countries**: Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Faroe Islands, Georgia, Iceland, Israel, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, Tunisia, Türkiye, Ukraine and the United Kingdom.

2. Startup:

Under Horizon Europe, a *startup* is understood as a small or medium-sized enterprise (SME) in the early stages of its life cycle. This includes newly established companies, particularly those created as spin-offs from university research activities, that aim to deliver innovative solutions and develop scalable business models. Such entities **must be autonomous** within the meaning of Article 3 of the Annex to Commission Recommendation 2003/361/EC.

Therefore, startups must meet the criteria of an SME as defined in Commission Recommendation 2003/361/EC, namely:

- Employing fewer than 250 persons (measured in Annual Work Units – AWU);
- Having an annual turnover not exceeding EUR 50 million, or an annual balance sheet total not exceeding EUR 43 million.
- Be autonomous within the meaning of Article 3 of the Annex to the above mentioned recommendation

3. Early-stage startup:

Early-stage refers to the phase of a startup's development, generally preceding the rapid growth phase. The following requirements must be met:

3.1 The applicant must be a legally established company (i.e. a registered legal entity).

As of the submission date of the application:

- The company must have been legally registered for **at least six (6) months**, and
- The company must have been legally registered for **no more than six (6) years**.

The company's age is calculated strictly from its official date of legal registration up to the submission date of the application. Companies that fall outside this timeframe are not eligible.

and;

3.2 Startups must have raised €1M or less in equity on the day of the application submission.

Important clarification: *By equity funding*, we refer specifically to capital raised in exchange for shares or ownership in the company. This excludes other types of private funding that do **not** involve giving away equity—such as grants, loans, or convertible notes that have not yet been converted. For the purpose of eligibility, we are only considering **equity-based investment**.

Instrument	Considered Equity?	Eligible?	Notes
Common/Preferred Shares	Yes	Not eligible if over €1M	Direct equity investment
SAFE (Simple Agreement for Future Equity)	Not yet equity	Eligible	Acceptable if not yet converted to equity at the time of application
Convertible Notes	Not yet equity	Eligible	As long as they have not yet converted into shares
Grants	No	Eligible	Non-dilutive public or private funding
Loans	No	Eligible	Includes bank loans and other private lending
Venture Debt	No	Eligible	Considered debt, not equity

Important Note: *Foundations, associations, federations or other types of legal entities different from a private company will not be eligible.*

4. Women's leadership: Open Horizons supports women in all their diversity. The word 'woman' equates to a cis woman or transgender woman who **is legally defined as a**

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woman. The consortium may request ID verification. The founding/co-founding requirement will be made eligible if the woman is legally recognised as a founder or co-founder of the company. The founder or co-founder of the company must also currently hold a top management position (CEO, CTO, CSO or equivalent) within the same company. It will also be required that women hold at least 25% of the shares in the CAP table (capitalisation table) of the company.

5. Deep-tech / Digital startups: To be eligible for the Open Horizons project, startups must clearly fall into one of the following categories: Deep-tech or Digital.

5. 1. Digital and deep-tech startups

A deep-tech startup is engaged in the development of advanced and disruptive technologies that are based on cutting-edge scientific advances and discoveries. These startups are at the forefront of technological innovation, constantly interacting with new ideas and results from scientific research and development. Deep-tech aims to provide concrete solutions to societal problems by deeply engaging with the most recent scientific and technological advances.

Deep-tech innovation often includes areas such as advanced computing, artificial intelligence (AI), life sciences, advanced manufacturing, energy and clean technologies, new materials, cybersecurity, robotics, and nanotechnology. Importantly, digital and deep-tech startups focus on original scientific research and technological breakthroughs that push the boundaries of what existing technologies can achieve.

Note: *If a startup simply uses existing technologies (e.g., off-the-shelf AI models for data analysis or chatbots) but does not engage in breakthrough scientific development or create novel technological advancements, it is not considered deep-tech.*

5.2. Digital Startups

A digital startup is a company that leverages existing digital technologies as the core of its business model. These companies offer innovative products or services based on software, online platforms, mobile applications, cloud services, data analytics, and more. Unlike digital and deep-tech startups, which focus on developing cutting-edge scientific technologies, digital startups transform processes, user experiences, and business models through the strategic use of already-established digital tools.

Digital startups play a vital role in the digital economy, driving innovation, scalability, and accessibility across sectors such as e-commerce, fintech, edtech, digital health, and digital marketing.

Important Note for Applicants:

Your startup must be either deep-tech or digital to apply for the Open Horizons project. If your startup falls into both categories, you can still apply, but you must select one when completing the application form.

In addition, the following conditions apply:

- The organisations applying should not have convictions regarding fraudulent behaviour, other financial irregularities, or unethical or illegal business practices.
- The participating organisations should not have been declared bankrupt or have initiated bankruptcy procedures.
- Open Horizons project beneficiaries must have the appropriate resources to implement the full set of tasks needed within the project. This means beneficiaries are not allowed to subcontract key parts of the project:
    - Examples (not restricted to) of subcontracting not desired are paying an external developer not in the company, paying a research centre or foundation to execute technical tasks, etc. Employees of a company are never considered subcontractors but part of the company itself.

- Examples (not restricted to) of subcontracting activities that could be appropriate if needed are legal services or design services.
- In addition, the subcontracting amount should not represent a relevant amount (>15%) of the total budget that will be dedicated to the project.

2. Proposal submission process

2.1 Overall process

Submissions will be done ONLY via the Sploro Platform, and it will be the unique entry point for all applications. Applications submitted by any other means will not be considered or evaluated. ONLY the documentation included in the submission will be considered by evaluators.

A full list of applicants will be drafted containing their basic information for statistical purposes and clarity (which will also be shared with the EC for transparency). The application reception will close on **19 May 2026, at 17:00* CEST (Brussels time)**. There will not be any deadline for extension unless there is a Force Majeure situation, caused by the Open Horizons consortium and not by the applicants, which renders the system unavailable.

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2.2 Helpdesk

For any questions or support needs, applicants may contact the Open Horizons team via the dedicated helpdesk at oh@sploro.eu. The team aims to respond within two working days. To ensure timely assistance, applicants are advised to plan their submissions carefully and reach out well in advance of the deadline, at least two working days prior, if they expect a response.

Please be aware that messages sent outside this official support channel will not be processed. All queries related to the submission system, or the call must be directed exclusively to the above email. Requests received less than two working days before the call deadline will not be reviewed or answered. Failure to receive a reply in time will not be considered valid grounds for deadline extensions or proposal re-evaluation.

2.2.1 Technical issues

Applicants should be aware that it is best practice to submit at least two days before the deadline, to avoid any technical issues that can occur when there is a very high volume of activity on the online platform.

If you do experience technical issues preventing your submission in some way, this must be reported to the Helpdesk team **BEFORE** the official deadline. Anything received AFTER the deadline, even if just a minute later, will not be considered nor investigated.

At the event that you encounter technical issues, please contact the Helpdesk clearly explaining what you are experiencing, including any error messages or unexpected behaviour. Specify the steps leading up to the problem, so that it can be replicated it. Include a timestamp screenshot of your entire screen or the specific part where the issue is visible. Ensure that the screenshot includes the system clock or another form of a timestamp. If applicable, provide any other relevant details such as the device, operating system, and browser you are using.

Even if you have a timestamped screenshot showing the error taking place beforehand, if the message with the screenshot does NOT reach the Helpdesk before the deadline, it will not be considered nor investigated. The time log of when the initial report reaches the Helpdesk email is the only factor that will be considered. If an applicant provides a screenshot showing that, on their end, an email was sent before the deadline, but this time

does not match with the time log on the end of Helpdesk, it is always the Helpdesk's time log that will be considered.

Do not wait until the last moment to report technical issues to our Helpdesk. It is recommended that you attempt to submit your work at least 48 hours before the official deadline to avoid any unforeseen problems.

Any communication stating technical issues received after the call deadline will not be considered nor taken into account.

2.2.2 Amendment of submitted applications

The call deadline is final. No exceptions of any kind will be made, regardless of any personal circumstance that may have affected you on the day of the deadline. The Open Horizons team and the Helpdesk will not re-open or amend your application, nor consider any extra information or documentation sent to it after the deadline.

If an applicant discovers an error in a submitted application or aims to improve the application, the applicant may submit a new version provided the call deadline has not passed. In order to facilitate this step, the applicant must get in touch with the Helpdesk requesting to reopen the application. Applicants will be able to modify all answers of the application form as many times as needed until the deadline. Please be aware that once opened, the applicants should submit the completed form again before the set deadline or it will not be evaluated. Once resubmitted, only the last version received before the call deadline will be considered for evaluation. Failure to resubmit will result in the proposal not being evaluated.

Resubmission requests will be answered up to two days before the call deadline (subject to limitations described below). It is imperative that you title your email's subject with the words "REOPENING OF SUBMITTED APPLICATION" so that our team can quickly see it and

action it. The helpdesk cannot guarantee a timely response during the last two days of the open call. Consider this when writing your proposals. Failure to follow the above instructions would not be grounds for an extension or re-evaluation of a proposal

2.3 Application format and submission

The application form is structured into several sections designed to evaluate the alignment with the objectives of the Open Horizons programme, and assess the proposal's **excellence**, **impact**, and **implementation capacity**.

See Annex 1: Application Form here or in the "Resources" page of the project website.

The online application form is divided into the following sections:

1. Legal and Contact Information

This section gathers essential information about the applicant and the organisation:

- **Applicant details:** Name, position, email, and phone number.
- **Organisation information:** Legal name, registration country, TAX registration number, address, website.

2. Eligibility self-declaration: Applicants must confirm that their organisation:

  - Is founded or co-founded by women.
  - A woman founder or co-founder currently holds a key management position (e.g. CEO, CTO).
  - That at least 25% of its shares are owned by women.
  - Is a legally established entity.
  - It is a digital and/or deep-tech startup.

- Is legally registered no less than 6 months and no more than 6 years prior to the submission date.
- Qualifies as an autonomous SME as defined by the European Commission.
- Is active in one or more of the strategic digital technologies and deep-tech domains listed in the call.
- Startups must have raised €1M or less in equity before the submission date.
- Is free from any conflict of interest with consortium partners
- The proposal has not been previously funded, fully or partially, by any other initiative.

3. Project Description

Applicants must provide a brief overview of the proposed project in response to one of the published corporate challenges:

- Selected challenge addressed.
- Summary of the proposed innovation and value proposition.

4. Technical Excellence

This section evaluates the project's scientific and technological strength:

- Clear definition of objectives.
- Explanation of how the proposed solution addresses the selected challenge and its objectives.
- Description of the innovation's uniqueness and advancement over existing solutions.
- Description of feasibility, technical approach and expected impact.
- Description of the Open Science practices.

5. Implementation

This section assesses the capacity of the team to successfully carry out the project:

- Role and involvement of implementation team
- Team's experience, and complementary skills. Applicants must submit the CVs of the relevant team members. These must be uploaded only in English, in PDF format. Europass is recommended. No other languages will be accepted.
- Activity plan. Quality and feasibility of the work plan and timeline.
- Gantt Chart of the proposed solution. The document must be in English, no other languages will be accepted.
- Risk assessment and mitigation strategy.

6. Impact

Here, applicants must demonstrate the potential of their innovation in terms of:

- Impact created in the challenge sector, scalability, long-term sustainability.
- Business plan and market strategy.
- Expected socio-economic and environmental impact.

7. Startup information

Applicants must provide a summary of their startup and core activities, define which tech domains their companies are addressing and provide funding and commercialisation information. More specifically, they will be asked to complete sections on:

- Funding and commercialisation information including historical and forecast financial information. Note that the application is requesting financial history information for the last 2 closed financial years, meaning 2024 and 2025. If you do

not have data for these years, please include the year and add 0€ in the amounts. Do not add data from 2026 or other years.

- Interest in scaling and investments rounds pursued until now and plan for the next 12 months.
- IPR strategy that applies to the innovation.

8. Ethics self-assessment

- The applicant confirms that the project will comply with fundamental ethical principles and all applicable EU legislation.
- No activities involving unethical practices (e.g. discrimination, exploitation, or misuse of technology) will be carried out within the proposed project.

9. Declaration of Honour

Applicants must confirm and certify that:

- All information provided is accurate and truthful.
- They commit to participate if selected, with stable funding and sufficient resources.
- They are not subject to any exclusion situations (e.g. administrative sanctions, conflicts of interest).
- They have not received previous funding under the same initiative.

10. Privacy Policy

Applicants must acknowledge the data privacy terms under the Open Horizons programme, in accordance with the EU GDPR.

2.4 Application preparation

To ensure your proposal is successfully submitted to the Open Horizons third open call, it is strongly recommended that the following steps are followed:

1. Review eligibility and the call documentation: Begin by consulting these guidelines for applicants and verifying your organisation's eligibility.
2. Complete the online application thoroughly: Applications must be submitted via the online platform, with all sections completed accurately. Ensure that **all required documents** listed in the call are uploaded. Incomplete submissions, whether due to missing answers or missing documents, will not be considered.
3. Prepare the required documentation in advance: If pre-selected for funding, certain documents needed in the signature of the sub-grant agreement may take time to obtain. Applicants are encouraged to consult Section 6.4 and account for the time needed to gather these materials in advance.
4. Be clear and concise: Provide precise and to-the-point responses. Open questions have character limits, so structure your answers accordingly.

It is recommended to carefully review all official open call documentation and participate in at least one of the dedicated online "Info Days". These sessions will take place on:

- 1st Info Day: Wednesday 18th of March, 2026, 10:00 CET (Brussels)
- 2nd Info Day: 16th of April 2026, 16:00 CEST (Brussels)

The sessions will be recorded and made available on the website later on.

3. Challenges

As part of this initiative, a curated set of **real, market-driven challenges** provided by leading corporates was identified. These challenges represent **concrete technological problems** that require innovative, deep-tech solutions—offering startups a unique opportunity to test, validate, and potentially co-develop their technologies with real-world applications and demand.

Startups applying to this call will be invited to select **one** of the published challenges that aligns with their solution and propose how they can address it. *Note*: Startups are expected to propose one or more components that contribute meaningfully to the overall solution. A complete or 'full stack' delivery is not required.

Challenge 1

Title:	Towards Reliable and Data-Efficient Machine Learning for Engineering Simulation
Sector:	**AI, Advanced computing**
Description:	Machine Learning (ML) methods have gained significant attention for their potential to accelerate simulations across engineering domains. Numerous studies highlight promising results, particularly in reducing computational costs and enabling faster design iterations. However, applying ML in engineering contexts introduces a distinct set of requirements not typically encountered in consumer applications. Engineering simulations demand a high degree of reliability, robustness, and – crucially – quantifiable accuracy. Predictions must be trustworthy, especially in safety-critical or tightly regulated environments. Yet, many current ML solutions fall short of meeting these standards. Specifically, because the required large amounts of high-fidelity training data are hard to obtain (high compute efforts

	and extremely large file sizes up to multiple GB). Thus, the resulting models tend to be narrowly scoped, typically limited to specific geometries or single physical phenomena. Another key limitation is the lack of rigorous error estimates and confidence metrics that are essential for engineering decision-making. Without such guarantees, ML models are challenging to deploy in practical simulation workflows, especially at an industrial scale. The development of data-efficient, generalizable, and verifiable ML methods tailored to the needs of engineering simulation remains an open challenge. Solutions must strike a balance between performance and reliability, ideally requiring less training data while still delivering robust predictions across diverse use cases. But if successfully addressed there is a plenitude of potential use cases across the complete lifecycle of industrial products.
Objectives:	• Develop machine learning methods tailored to engineering simulations that require high reliability, robustness, and interpretability • Design data-efficient ML models capable of producing accurate predictions with limited high-fidelity training data • Integrate uncertainty quantification and error estimation mechanisms directly into the model pipeline • Improve generalisation capabilities of ML models across different geometries, physical phenomena, and simulation scenarios • Ensure compatibility with existing simulation workflows and industrial standards, especially in safety-critical contexts
Expected outputs:	● A set of ML models or architectures that demonstrate reliable performance with reduced training data requirements ● Incorporation of built-in confidence metrics or rigorous error bounds suitable for engineering decision-making

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	● Demonstrated ability to generalise across multiple simulation cases or design parameters ● Integration prototype or plug-in that supports simulation workflows with minimal user intervention ● Reduced computational costs for simulation tasks, enabling faster design and iteration cycles ● A foundation for broader adoption of ML in industrial-grade simulation environments, with traceable and explainable outputs. Preferred technology areas: • Physics-Informed Machine Learning (PINNs / Scientific ML) • Data-Efficient Learning (Few-shot, Transfer, Meta-learning) • Uncertainty Quantification & Probabilistic AI • Neural Operators & Geometry-Aware Architectures

Challenge 2

Title:	**Enabling Secure and Efficient Model Exchange in Simulation Workflows**
Sector:	Blockchain, Metaverse, Cybersecurity, Internet of Things
Description:	Creating effective Simulation Models remains a major bottleneck (in terms of effort and required expertise) in simulation-based engineering and system design. But at the same time, one can observe a repeated model development of the same/similar components. This inefficiency is largely driven by the limited exchange of models between stakeholders, which stems from

	concerns around compatibility, intellectual property protection, and cybersecurity. With the emergence of the digital economy and the growing interest in the industrial metaverse, new opportunities for sharing and monetizing models are arising. However, despite the existence of technical standards for model exchange - such as the Functional Mock-up Interface or Modelica - there is a lack of robust infrastructure to support safe and controlled distribution models. Key requirements include protection against unauthorised access, clear licensing frameworks, and traceability of model usage.
Objectives:	● Develop a secure and standardised framework for exchanging simulation models across organisations and platforms ● Ensure intellectual property protection through encryption, digital rights management (DRM), and secure model packaging ● Enable traceability and controlled access to simulation models, including usage tracking and auditability ● Support integration with existing model exchange standards such as FMI (Functional Mock-up Interface) and Modelica ● Establish licensing mechanisms and access control policies that govern model sharing and reuse ● Facilitate the creation of marketplaces or collaborative platforms for simulation model distribution and monetisation
Expected outputs:	● A secure infrastructure or platform that allows safe model sharing while preserving IP rights and ensuring cyberresilience ● Integration of access control features such as user authentication, usage logging, and role-based permissions ● Implementation of licensing templates or mechanisms (e.g., pay-per-use, subscription, academic/public domain) ● Compatibility with existing simulation tools and standards to support seamless adoption ● Reduction in redundant model development efforts through improved model reuse and discoverability

	● Foundational support for simulation model economies in the context of the industrial metaverse and digital twin ecosystems Preferred technology areas: • Secure Model Exchange Platforms & Interoperability Frameworks • Blockchain & Distributed Ledger for IP Protection • Digital Rights Management (DRM) & Encryption Technologies • Identity, Access Control & Usage Traceability Systems

Challenge 3

Title:	**Smart Tax Strategy Design for International Business Expansion**
Sector:	FinTech, LegalTech, Enterprise Software, International Business Enablement
Description:	A major professional services organisation working closely with scaling companies observes that international expansion often brings fragmented and reactive approaches to tax planning. Companies entering multiple jurisdictions face complex, fast-changing tax regulations, overlapping compliance obligations, and inconsistent interpretations across countries. Without a cohesive, forward-looking tax strategy, businesses risk inefficient structures, increased tax liabilities, compliance exposure, and delayed decision-making. Tax planning is frequently handled manually or through siloed advisors, making it difficult to model scenarios, anticipate risks, or align tax considerations with business and talent expansion plans. The challenge is to enable a holistic, proactive, and data-driven approach to strategic business and personal tax planning that

	supports international growth while remaining compliant across jurisdictions.
Objectives:	● Enable companies to design integrated tax strategies aligned with international expansion plans ● Reduce inefficiencies and compliance risks caused by fragmented tax planning ● Improve decision-making by offering forward-looking tax impact visibility ● Support alignment between corporate structuring, mobility of key personnel, and regulatory requirements
Expected outputs:	● A solution capable of mapping tax implications across multiple jurisdictions ● Scenario-based modeling of business and personal tax exposure linked to expansion decisions ● Improved tax efficiency while maintaining regulatory compliance ● Clear visibility into risks, obligations, and optimisation opportunities ● A PoC demonstrating applicability in at least two jurisdictions Preferred technology areas: • AI/ML for regulatory interpretation and scenario simulation • Rule-based engines for tax logic and compliance modeling • Data analytics and visualization tools • Secure cloud platforms handling sensitive financial data • LegalTech / RegTech solutions supporting cross-border compliance Proposed solutions must demonstrate a significant technological innovation component, relying on advanced computational methods (e.g. AI/ML, automated reasoning, or advanced analytics) that go beyond rule-based systems or traditional advisory tools.

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Challenge 4

Title:	**Intelligent Tax Compliance & Optimisation for International Market Entry**
Sector:	FinTech, RegTech, LegalTech, International Trade & Finance
Description:	When companies expand internationally, navigating tax obligations across different markets becomes increasingly complex. Each jurisdiction introduces unique tax rules, reporting requirements, and compliance timelines. In many cases, companies lack clear visibility into available tax optimisation alternatives, incentives, or structuring options that could significantly impact profitability and cash flow. This challenge is amplified by limited internal expertise, reliance on manual processes, and insufficient tools for comparing tax treatments across markets. As a result, businesses may overpay taxes, miss legitimate optimisation opportunities, or face compliance risks that slow down expansion. The challenge is to provide intelligent, accessible tools that help companies understand, compare, and manage international tax obligations while identifying compliant optimisation paths.
Objectives:	● Improve awareness of tax obligations and optimisation options across international markets ● Enable structured comparison of tax regimes, incentives, and compliance requirements ● Support compliant decision-making during market entry and scaling ● Enhance cash flow management through optimised tax positioning

Expected outputs:	● A solution offering visibility into international tax obligations and optimisation alternatives ● Reduction in unnecessary tax liabilities through compliant structuring ● Improved cash flow and financial predictability for expanding companies ● A PoC validating usability and impact for at least one international expansion scenario ● Clear auditability and compliance safeguards built into the solution Preferred technology areas: • AI-driven decision support systems • RegTech platforms for cross-border tax compliance • Knowledge graphs and expert systems for tax logic mapping • Secure data processing and encryption technologies • Dashboard-based financial and regulatory analytics Proposed solutions must demonstrate a significant technological innovation component, relying on advanced computational methods (e.g. AI/ML, automated reasoning, or advanced analytics) that go beyond rule-based systems or traditional advisory tools.

Challenge 5

Title:	**Ultra-Rapid Biodegradable Polymer Materials for Controlled Environments**
Sector:	Advanced Materials / Industrial Biotech / Circular Economy / Greentech
Description:	Conventional plastics persist in the environment for decades, contributing significantly to pollution and ecological harm. While biodegradable plastics exist, most require extended periods and

	specific conditions to decompose, limiting their effectiveness in high-turnover or short-lifecycle applications. This challenge seeks breakthrough approaches in advanced materials and industrial biotechnology to enable ultra-rapid biodegradation of polymer-based materials, targeting degradation timelines of 24 hours under clearly defined and controlled conditions (e.g. industrial composting, enzymatic treatment, aqueous environments, or biological reactors).
Objectives:	We are seeking deep-tech solutions that explore novel pathways for accelerated material breakdown, such as: ● New biodegradable materials or composite materials ○ the fast degradation materials should not start to degrade too fast (i. e. before or during use or under transport and usage). ○ the materials should be stable at temperatures of 60-70° C and high air humidity (same range as industrial composting) ○ the materials should have water-barrier properties, strength, able to replace polymers. ● Enzyme-activated or trigger-based degradation mechanisms ● Bio-based or synthetic-biology-driven polymer production ● Materials designed for specific short-life applications (e.g. packaging, single-use, medical or logistics use cases Solutions should demonstrate: ● Scientifically grounded degradation mechanisms ● Measurable breakdown within 24 hours under defined conditions ● Reduced environmental toxicity and safe by-products ● A credible pathway toward industrial scalability

Expected outputs:	● Demonstrated rapid biodegradation in controlled environments ● Clear characterisation of degradation conditions and by-products ● Validation data supporting environmental safety and circularity ● Potential use cases aligned with real-world industrial needs Preferred technology areas: • Advanced Materials Science • Polymer Chemistry • Industrial Biotechnology & Enzymatic Engineering • Synthetic Biology • Green Chemistry & Circular Materials

Challenge 6

Title:	**AI-Powered Optimisation of Last-Mile Delivery for Multi-Channel Retail**
Sector:	Artificial Intelligence · Logistics · Retail Tech · IoT
Description:	This corporation operates multiple fast-growing e-commerce channels, including on-demand grocery delivery and scheduled online orders. As delivery volumes increase, last-mile operations are becoming increasingly complex due to store-based fulfilment, hybrid warehouse models, traffic variability, delivery time windows, and fleet constraints. Current routing approaches struggle to dynamically adapt to real-time conditions, leading to inefficiencies, increased costs, and suboptimal customer experience.
Objectives:	This challenge seeks innovative digital or AI-driven solutions that can dynamically optimise last-mile delivery routes using real-time inputs such as traffic conditions, order priorities, delivery density, and vehicle availability. The goal is to improve operational

	efficiency, increase delivery capacity, and reduce delivery times while maintaining service quality. Startups are invited to propose solutions that contribute meaningful components to route optimisation, real-time decision engines, predictive demand modelling, or fleet intelligence. A full end-to-end logistics platform is not required.
Expected outputs:	The pilot should demonstrate measurable improvements such as reduced delivery cost per order ("10% reduction in delivery per cost order), faster average delivery times ("12% improvement in average delivery time"), increased order throughput per delivery slot, or improved on-time delivery performance. Success may also include proof of scalability across multiple cities or fulfilment models. Preferred technology areas: • Artificial Intelligence & Machine Learning • Route Optimization Algorithms • Real-Time Data Processing • IoT & Mobility Solutions • Advanced Analytics

Challenge 7

Title:	**Upcycling Food Loss into High-Value Circular Products**

Funded by the European Union

Sector:	Agri Tech, Circular Economy, Sustainability, Food Processing, Supply Chain/Logistics
Description:	A significant volume of fresh fruits and vegetables is lost across the value chain due to cosmetic standards, overstock, demand volatility, logistics constraints, or shelf-life limitations, even when the produce is still safe and suitable for human consumption. Today, a large share is downgraded to low-value uses or discarded, leading to avoidable economic loss and environmental impact.
Objectives:	This challenge seeks innovative solutions that reduce food loss by enabling upcycling and valorisation of edible but commercially unsellable produce into higher-value products, ingredients, or processes- or by improving coordination across the chain to prevent loss in the first place. Proposed approaches may include processing technologies, new circular business models, sorting/quality assessment methods, or digital tools that connect supply, demand, and processing capacity. Solutions can also include technologies that extend usability (e.g., preservation, packaging, rapid quality assessment), as long as the scope also supports value-creating upcycling pathways. Solutions should be realistic for a pilot with a retail/logistics operator, and consider food safety, operational feasibility, scalability, and commercial viability.
Expected outputs:	A successful pilot may demonstrate, for example: • Measurable reduction of avoidable fresh-produce loss (e.g. 10% reduction within a defined category/flow), • Improved collection/sorting efficiency, • Creation or validation of a viable upcycled product/ingredient pathway, • Proof of a scalable valorisation model with clear unit economics.

	Preferred Technology Areas: • Agri Tech • Circular Economy • Food Processing Innovation • QA/sensing • Supply Chain Analytics • Sustainability Tech

Challenge 8

Title:	**Innovative Energy Solutions for Retail Stores and Distribution Centres**
Sector:	Energy, Greentech , AI/Data, IoT, Smart Buildings/Industrial Systems
Description:	Our Corporate partner operates an extensive retail and logistics footprint with high energy consumption driven by refrigeration, HVAC, lighting, and store operations. While energy usage is monitored, there is still significant potential to reduce consumption, improve resilience, and integrate smarter approaches across stores and distribution centres. The focus is on solutions that are feasible to pilot in a real operational environment and can demonstrate measurable impact on energy consumption, cost, or emissions, while preserving customer comfort and product integrity.
Objectives:	This challenge invites innovative energy solutions that can help our partner improve energy performance and sustainability outcomes. Solutions may include, for example: • Data-driven optimisation (AI-based forecasting, anomaly detection, automated control), • Smart building/equipment efficiency solutions,

	• Energy recovery and regenerative approaches (such as harvesting or recovering energy from operational systems/devices), • Storage or hybrid solutions where relevant, • Modular interventions that can be deployed at site level and scaled across multiple locations.
Expected outputs:	• A successful pilot could demonstrate, for example: • Measurable energy savings (e.g., 5–10% reduction in defined consumption areas), • Improved detection of abnormal consumption patterns or equipment malfunction, • Validated reduction of carbon footprint/operational cost, • Clear scaling logic across stores and/or warehouses. Preferred Technology Areas: • Energy efficiency • Greentech • AI/ML (where relevant) • IoT/sensing • Smart buildings • Energy recovery/regenerative systems • Optimisation platforms

Challenge 9

Title:	**AI-Assisted Sustainable Formulation Acceleration for Barrier Coatings**
Sector:	Sector: Advanced Materials · AI & Machine Learning · Sustainable Manufacturing · Computational Chemistry
Description:	Formulation R&D in advanced materials remains highly time-intensive and heavily dependent on physical experimentation. In

	parallel, large volumes of valuable secondary data – including scientific publications, patents, and technical databases – are underutilised due to fragmentation, access limitations, and lack of structured integration into R&D workflows. This challenge focuses on accelerating sustainable formulation development for barrier coatings, where innovation cycles are currently slowed by limited structured datasets, intellectual property constraints, and the need for explainable, trustworthy AI models. The goal is to explore AI-assisted approaches that can augment formulation screening, identify promising sustainable chemistries, and guide experimental design, while respecting IP boundaries and supporting decision-making in R&D environments.
Objectives:	● Develop AI-assisted approaches to accelerate formulation screening for sustainable barrier coatings. ● Leverage secondary data sources (scientific literature, patents, databases) to support formulation discovery and hypothesis generation. ● Enable identification of novel or underexplored sustainable chemistries for coating formulations. ● Address constraints related to limited structured datasets and IP boundaries. ● Ensure model transparency and explainability to support R&D decision-making and lab validation.
Expected outputs:	● Demonstrated reduction of formulation screening time by approximately 30–50%. ● Identification of promising sustainable formulation candidates for barrier coatings. ● Improved hit-rate of lab trials through more targeted experimental selection. ● A proof-of-concept tool or workflow supporting AI-assisted formulation exploration and prioritisation.

	Preferred Technology Areas: • Generative Chemistry and computational materials design • Simulation and surrogate modelling for formulation performance • AI/ML for materials discovery • LLM-based literature and patent mining • Data-driven R&D decision support tools.

Challenge 10

Title:	**AI-Powered Onboarding & Employee Journey Assistant**
Sector:	Sector: HR Tech · Enterprise Software · AI Assistants · Knowledge Management
Description:	Employee onboarding is often fragmented across multiple internal stakeholders (HR, IT, and line managers), resulting in a disjointed experience for new hires. Without a single entry point for information, tasks, and support, onboarding quality becomes inconsistent and employees take longer to become productive. Depending on manager and department, they also lack primary knowledge about the company. This challenge seeks an AI-powered onboarding and employee journey assistant that can serve as a central, always-available interface for guidance, onboarding tasks, and company knowledge. The solution must operate in a privacy-compliant way and integrate effectively with an enterprise Microsoft 365 (M365) environment.

Objectives:	● Provide a single entry point for onboarding guidance, information, and task coordination. ● Support new hires with contextual help on tools, policies, processes, and role-specific onboarding steps. ● Standardise onboarding quality and reduce dependency on manual follow-ups across departments. ● Improve employee access to structured company knowledge. ● Ensure data privacy and secure operation, with integration into M365.
Expected outputs:	● A functional "onboarding companion" (AI assistant) for new employees. ● Approximately 20–30% reduction in onboarding time (time-to-productivity). ● A more standardised and consistent onboarding experience across teams. ● Improved employee familiarity with company knowledge and internal processes. ● 24/7 guidance for new hires (tasks, tools, policies, and support queries). ● A full introduction into the company Preferred Technology Areas: • AI assistants • Conversational agents • Chatbots and workflow automation • Microsoft 365 (M365) integration • Knowledge management and enterprise search

Challenge 11

Title:	**Automated Demand & Market Forecasting Using Public Data**

Funded by the European Union

Sector:	Sector: Data Analytics · AI / ML · Business Intelligence · Market Intelligence
Description:	Demand and market forecasting currently relies heavily on manually gathered external knowledge. Publicly available datasets such as economic indicators, energy market data, inflation metrics, and trade flows are not systematically exploited in forecasting processes. This results in lower forecast accuracy, slower decision-making cycles, and reduced organisational agility. The challenge is to develop an automated forecasting approach that integrates relevant public data sources into forecasting workflows, while addressing constraints related to data quality variability, model transparency, and integration with existing internal systems.
Objectives:	● Systematically integrate relevant public datasets into demand and market forecasting processes. ● Reduce reliance on manual collection and interpretation of external data. ● Improve forecast accuracy and responsiveness to external market signals. ● Enable faster scenario analysis and decision support. ● Ensure transparency of forecasting models and compatibility with existing internal systems.
Expected outputs:	● At least +10% improvement in forecast accuracy for procurement and sales. ● Automated generation of monthly and/or weekly forecasts. ● Faster scenario analysis capabilities. ● Reduced manual workload related to data collection and forecasting preparation. Preferred technology areas: • Data integration and data pipelines • Predictive analytics and forecasting models • Process automation

Funded by the European Union

Challenge 12

Title:	**AI for Production Bottleneck Detection & Workflow Optimisation**
Sector:	Industrial AI · Advanced Analytics · Manufacturing Systems · Process Optimisation
Description:	In many production environments, key operational processes are still handled manually, leading to quality issues and limited process transparency. Bottlenecks, delays, and inefficiencies are often not visible in real time, making it difficult to identify root causes and take timely corrective action. This results in higher operational costs, increased variability in production outcomes, and slower throughput. The challenge is to apply AI-driven process analysis to detect bottlenecks and inefficiencies in production workflows, while addressing constraints related to legacy systems, limited data accessibility, and real-time monitoring capabilities.
Objectives:	● Identify and surface hidden bottlenecks, delays, and inefficiencies in production workflows. ● Reduce quality issues linked to manual or opaque production processes. ● Provide predictive insights into potential delays, downtime, and waste. ● Enable data-driven optimisation of production workflows. ● Ensure feasibility within environments constrained by legacy systems and limited real-time data availability.
Expected outputs:	● Reduction in quality issues in production processes. ● Measurable improvement in operational efficiency. ● Predictive visibility into delays, downtime, and waste.

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	● Automated recommendations for workflow and process optimisation. Preferred technology areas: • Process Mining & Workflow Intelligence • Predictive Analytics & Time-Series AI • Industrial IoT & Real-Time Anomaly Detection • Prescriptive AI & Process Optimisation Algorithms

4. Financial Support

Open Horizons' third open call offers a total budget of **€475,000***. In this OC#3, Open Horizons is offering equity-free funding to empower up to 16 women-led startups, 7 of which will go on to the piloting stage. Each company can receive up to €55,000, which is disbursed depending on and based on the achievement of KPIs, participation in the programme's activities, and performance on the final demo day.

*Should any funds remain unallocated from previous cohorts, the consortium retains the right to redistribute them across any stage of the third cohort, with the possibility of having more startups included in the programme of services.

4.1 Criteria for payment financial support

For the sake of simplicity and transparency, the Financial Support in the Open Horizons project will be disbursed upon the achievement of specific milestones or Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Thus, we have established a clear set of criteria for each stage to calculate the exact amount of financial support.

5. Programme

The Open Horizons programme is structured into two main stages with a total duration of 6 months: the **Inception Stage (1 month)** and the **Piloting Stage (5 months)**. A total of €475,000, and **up to €55,000 per selected startup** will be disbursed in the form of equity-free grants across both phases, based on performance and engagement with the assigned corporate partner. Only 7 of the selected startups (up to 16 selected) will advance from the Inception Stage to the Piloting Stage.

5.1 Inception Stage (1-month)

Following the evaluation of the third Open Call, up to **16 women-led digital or digital and deep-tech startups** will be selected to enter the Inception Stage. Each selected startup will be eligible to receive a grant of up to **€10,000**, contingent on the successful completion of project activities and deliverables.

Mandatory activities:

- **Virtual kick-off session** with the Open Horizons consortium and corporate partners.
- **Training workshop** on the Business Model Canvas (BMC).
- **1:1 onboarding meeting** with the assigned corporate partner.
- **Evaluation interview** with the programme team and corporate representative.

Deliverables to be submitted:

- **D1.1: Business Model Canvas**, tailored to the selected corporate use case.
- **D1.2: Pilot Planning Document** (5-month roadmap), outlining:
  - Key activities and milestones.

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- KPIs to be tracked during the pilot (e.g., user/customer acquisition, integration with corporate systems, feedback from users/corporate staff, technical feasibility, number of issues encountered/resolved, etc.).

All deliverables must comply with the **minimum quality standards***, defined through a weighted scoring system based on the established evaluation criteria.

***"Minimum quality standard"** means that deliverables must be complete, coherent, and sufficiently detailed to allow objective evaluation of corporate relevance, feasibility of the proposed PoC, and business model clarity. Deliverables that are incomplete, inconsistent, purely conceptual, or insufficiently detailed will not meet this standard.

All startups completing the Inception Stage undergo a formal evaluation conducted exclusively by InnovX expert evaluators. The submitted written deliverables are assessed against the official Evaluation Grid and Criteria.

Final scores are based on this expert assessment. Evaluation interviews may be organised only if clarification is required.

Only startups that **fully participate in all required activities** and submit both deliverables in line with the minimum quality standards will be awarded the full **€10,000 grant**. Failure to comply will result in ineligibility for funding and the termination of participation in the programme.

Progression to the Piloting (PoC Implementation) Stage

All startups participating in the Inception Stage, will receive a **GO OR NO-GO confirmation** from the Corporate Partner with whom they were matched. This confirmation reflects the Corporate Partner's strategic and operational decision and

includes their commitment and assumptions regarding how the Piloting Stage would proceed.

Corporate Partners assess the strategic fit of each startup's proposed solution in relation to their challenge, focusing on:

- Practical relevance
- Feasibility of collaboration
- Potential value of pursuing a PoC

The **six highest-ranked** startups, based on the overall weighted evaluation score and subject to Corporate Partner confirmation, will advance to the PoC Implementation Phase.

Only startups that:

- Are **eligible for the €10,000 Inception funding**, and
- Receive a **Corporate GO decision**,

may progress to the Piloting (PoC Implementation) Stage.

5.2 Piloting Stage (5 months)

Out of the **16 selected startups** that participate in the Inception Stage, up to **7 will be selected** by corporates to advance to the Piloting Stage. This stage consists of a **five-month collaboration** with the matched corporate partner to implement the pilot solution outlined in the planning phase.

Mandatory activities:

- **Follow up KPIs monitoring, including:**
  - User/customer acquisition rates within the corporate context

- Successful technical and/or operational integration into corporate systems or workflows
- Qualitative feedback from corporate staff and end-users
- Number and nature of issues encountered and resolved during the pilot implementation

- **Participation in a final Demo Day** to present results and achievements. This event is required to unlock the final €5,000 equity-free grant.
- **Project implementation,** active implementation of the pilot project in the corporate environment**.**

Deliverables to be submitted:

- **D2.1: Mid-term progress Report**. This report will assess the initial progress of the pilot based on the predefined KPIs and milestones and will serve as the basis for the first disbursement of €20,000.
- **D2.2: Final Review progress Report**. A comprehensive summary of the pilot's implementation, documenting outcomes achieved against the KPIs and milestones (e.g. user acquisition, system integration success, feedback gathered, issues addressed), challenges encountered, and the overall impact of the solution within the corporate environment. The second disbursement of €20,000 will be granted upon successful achievement of the established objectives.

Funding breakdown:

- **€10,000** granted upon submission of both deliverables in line with the minimum quality standards
- **€20,000** disbursed after a successful **mid-term review (M4)** assessing progress against initial KPIs.

- **€20,000** granted upon successful **completion of the pilot project (M6)** and validation from the corporate partner.
- **€5,000** awarded upon active **participation in the Final Demo Day (M6)**, where startups will showcase their results to corporates, investors, and innovation stakeholders.

The total grant available during the programme is up to **€55,000 per startup**.

5.3 Follow-on (3 months, 1 session/month)

Following the completion of the pilot, startups enter a crucial phase focused on scaling their solutions and unlocking further commercial and investment opportunities. This stage is designed to strengthen the startup's visibility and position within the market:

- **Corporate Venture Capital Engagement**: Startups will benefit from structured introductions to Corporate Venture Capital (CVC) arms of the collaborating corporates. The aim is to facilitate follow-on funding or the formation of strategic partnerships, with a particular focus on aligning startup innovations with the corporations' investment strategies and sustainability objectives.
- **Commercial Opportunity Exploration**: Startups will have access to meetings with potential customers within and beyond the initial corporate teams, led by INNOVX and MIGROS. This includes facilitated introductions to new industry contacts, enabling the exploration of additional use cases and entry into new markets.
- **Joint Ventures Approach:** Where applicable, INNOVX will support the initiation of joint venture discussions between corporates and startups, aiming to scale the solution and amplify its impact in the market through shared value creation and long-term collaboration.

Proposed activities, led by INNOVX (with support from MIGROS):

Investor & Partner Activation

INNOVX and MIGROS will facilitate high-level introductions to:

- Corporate Venture Capital (CVC) units of partner corporations
- Strategic investors and venture funds
- Decision-makers from corporates outside the initial pilot

  These meetings aim to explore co-investment opportunities, spinoffs, licensing deals, and potential M&A interest.

Commercialisation Support

Startups will receive tailored support to:

- Transition from pilot to commercial contract
- Negotiate long-term collaboration frameworks (e.g., framework agreements, licensing terms)
- Map additional use cases for their technology within the corporate ecosystem

Strategic Scaling Pathways

INNOVX & MIGROS will mentor selected startups on:

- Entering new markets based on initial pilot traction
- Building long-term joint ventures with corporate partners
- Preparing for international fundraising or procurement opportunities

Visibility & Outreach

Participation in curated demo showcases, investor briefings, and speaking opportunities across the Open Horizons ecosystem to maximise exposure.

5.4 Open Science

Open Horizons promotes Open Science in line with European Commission principles, encouraging all beneficiaries to share results and publications early through preprint servers or public repositories, make use of open platforms such as OpenAIRE to disseminate research outputs, and, when appropriate, publish deliverables and materials under Creative Commons licenses to ensure broad access and reuse, enhancing transparency, collaboration, and impact across the innovation ecosystem

6. Proposal Evaluation and Selection Process

6.1 Evaluation process

The evaluation of Open Horizons proposals is based on a six-step approach:

1. Eligibility check,
2. Automatic red flags,
3. Remote evaluation,
4. Normalisation of results and
5. Interview

The evaluation process is shown in the following figure:

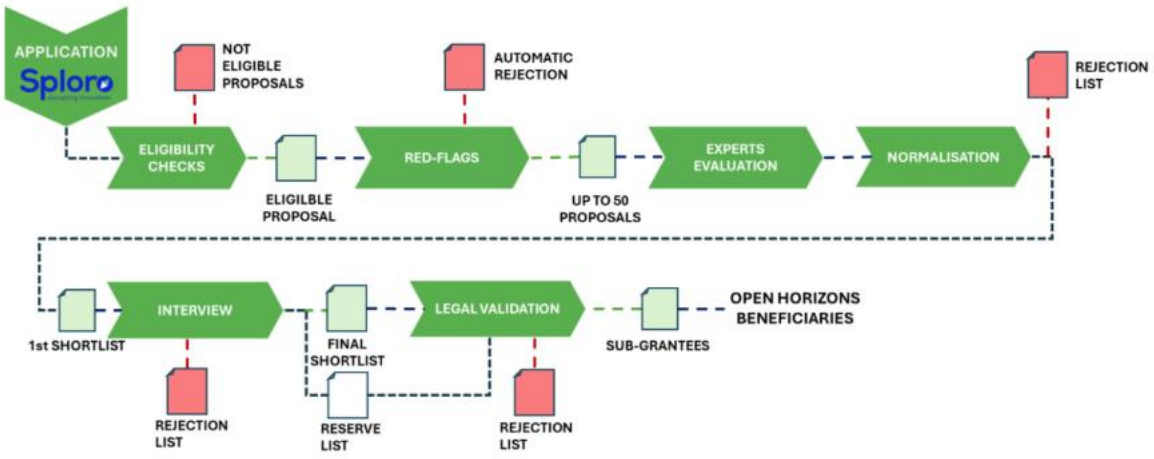

Figure 1. Evaluation process

Step 1: Eligibility criteria for startups

An automatic filtering process will be carried out to discard non-eligible proposals based on the following criteria:

- All documents requested and application forms must be properly completed and in **English**, and all necessary documents must be uploaded.
- The startup operates **within the digital and/or 'deep-tech' sector** and is clearly linked to the strategic digital technologies and deep-tech domains listed in the call.
- The startup is **founded or co-founded by women** holding a top management position (CEO, CTO or equivalent) in the company at the time of submission.
- Women should own at least **25% of the shares** of the company at the time of submission.
- The startup exists as a **legal entity.**
- The company is established in an **eligible country or region**.

- On the submission date of the application, the company must have been legally registered for a minimum of 6 months and have been in operation for less than 6 years.
- The startup must meet the criteria of an SME as defined in Commission Recommendation 2003/361/EC, namely:
    - Employing fewer than 250 persons (measured in Annual Work Units – AWU);
    - Having an annual turnover not exceeding EUR 50 million, or an annual balance sheet total not exceeding EUR 43 million.
    - Be **autonomous** as per Article 3 of the Annex of the EC Recommendation.
- The company must not have raised over 1M EUR in equity by the submission date.
- The activities proposed are unique and have not already been partially or fully funded by any other initiative (to avoid double funding).
- Startups must not have any conflict of interest with any of the consortium partners.

Proposals failing to meet **any** of the eligibility criteria will be automatically rejected, and applicants will receive a rejection letter with the reasons for ineligibility.

Step 2: Automatic red flags check

This step involves an automated filtering process to assess whether startups align with the programme's objectives. Four key indicators, or "red flags," will be evaluated:

1. Whether the startup has the capacity to survive without grants.
2. Whether the company demonstrates a strong orientation towards growth.
3. Whether the startup has an interest in scaling and attracting investors.

4. Whether the startup is genuinely deep-tech-focused.

Only those applications that pass this automatic filtering will proceed to the next phase.

In order to avoid fit-for-purpose proposals, the red-flags will be published only at the end of the project.

The number of applications that will move on to the evaluation phase by external experts will be limited to a maximum of 50 to ensure a manageable evaluation process, while ensuring a fair representation across the challenges.

Step 3. Remote evaluation

A panel of external evaluators with expertise in entrepreneurship, R&D, technology, and business development will assess the remaining applications. Each proposal will be reviewed by two independent evaluators and scored based on:

1) Excellence: ***Excellence*** is evaluated according to the following criteria:

a) Alignment with the challenge proposed by the corporate partner and chosen by the startup.

b) Degree of innovation (i.e., going beyond the state-of-the-art, chances to succeed, and its feasibility).

c) Feasibility, technical approach and expected impact

d) Implementation of Open Science practice during the project.

2) Implementation: ***Implementation*** is evaluated according to the following criteria:

a) Team composition and expertise – The evaluators will assess the qualifications and commitment of the team members involved in the project. Particular attention

will be paid to the relevance of their experience and skills in relation to the project objectives, as well as their roles and responsibilities in the implementation process.

b) Clarity and coherence of the activity plan – The proposed activities must be clearly defined, logically structured, and appropriate to the project's current development stage. The evaluation will consider how well these activities contribute to achieving the project's goals, the presence of interdependencies or critical paths, and the mechanisms for monitoring progress.

c) Project timeline and structure – The quality of the Gantt chart will be evaluated in terms of completeness, timing, allocation of responsibilities, and alignment with the proposed activities and milestones over the 6-month period.

d) Risk management – Applicants must demonstrate awareness of potential technical, operational, and external risks and present appropriate mitigation strategies. Evaluation will focus on the realism of the identified risks and the robustness of the proposed responses.

3) Impact: ***Impact*** is evaluated according to the following criteria:

a) Relevance and innovation potential of the proposed solution in addressing a clearly identified deep-tech challenge, including its capacity to drive transformation within its target market or sector. The evaluators will assess how well the solution responds to an existing need and its potential for meaningful, scalable, and sustainable impact.

b) Implementation readiness and market entry potential, considering how effectively the proposed innovation bridges the gap between research and real-

world application. This includes its technical feasibility, compatibility with current systems or environments, and readiness for deployment in relevant use cases.

c) Contribution to strategic transitions, such as the green, digital, and social transitions, will be positively considered where relevant. Solutions aligned with broader EU priorities and capable of reinforcing sustainable and inclusive development are encouraged.

d) Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) – Consideration will be given to how the applicant plans to manage intellectual property related to the innovation, including existing protections (e.g., patents, copyrights), open-source strategies, or plans for future registrations (e.g., utility models). The alignment of the IPR approach with the overall business and dissemination strategy will be assessed.

Proposals will be evaluated **by two independent evaluators** (technical and business profile), who will receive evaluation guidelines, templates, and information on process timing and conflict of interest rules. Evaluation documents will follow the consortium's expertise and the European Commission's standards. Evaluators and experts will sign a declaration of impartiality and confidentiality.

Each evaluator will score proposals on a scale of 0 to 5, based on the previous three criteria. The score definitions range from 0 (fails to address the criterion) to 5 (successfully addresses all aspects). **A proposal must score at least 3 in each criterion, and 10 overall to be considered for funding.**

SCORE	DEFINITION
0	**The proposal fails** to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.

1	**Poor** – criterion is inadequately addressed, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
2	**Fair** – The proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses.
3	**Good** – The proposal addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present.
4	**Very good** – proposal addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.
5	The proposal **successfully addresses** all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

Table 2. Criteria score

Step 4: Normalisation

Given that each proposal will be evaluated independently by two different experts, it is natural for scoring variations to occur due to differences in perspectives, criteria interpretation, or personal judgment. These variations can sometimes lead to discrepancies that might unfairly advantage or disadvantage certain proposals.

To ensure fairness and consistency in the evaluation process, a **mathematical normalisation process** will be applied. This method adjusts the scores given by different evaluators to create a balanced and standardised ranking system. By applying this approach, it can prevent situations where one evaluator's stricter or more lenient scoring significantly impacts the overall ranking of a proposal.

The normalisation criterion will be applied by following the steps below:

1) Calculate the Total Average Score: This is the overall average of all scores given by all evaluators across the proposals.

2) Calculate the Average Score per Evaluator: This is the average score awarded by each evaluator.

3) Determine the Evaluation Deviation Factor: Compare each evaluator's average score with the Total Average Score to calculate their personalised Evaluation Deviation Factor. This indicates whether an evaluator is generally more positive or negative than average.

4) Adjust the individual scores: Add 1 to the evaluator's Deviation Factor, then multiply it by each of their original scores. This produces normalised scores that correct for individual evaluator bias.

5) Calculate the final score for each proposal: Take the average of the normalised scores provided by all evaluators.

The normalisation process minimises potential biases and ensures that all startups are assessed on a level playing field. This leads to a more objective and equitable selection process, allowing the most promising and high-potential startups to advance to the final stages of evaluation.

The final score will be an average of the individual assessments, adjusted for bias after normalisation. This step will produce a shortlist of applicants, twice the number of projects to be funded, that is up to 32 for this call.

At the end of this step, a shortlist of applicants will be created, following the rules below:

- **Rule 1:** The proposals will be ranked based on their overall score.
- **Rule 2:** In case, following Rule 1, there are proposals in the same position, priority will be given to proposals that have a higher score on the Excellence & Impact award criterion.

- **Rule 3:** In case, following Rule 2, there are proposals in the same position, priority will be given to proposals that have a higher score on the Implementation award criterion.
- **Rule 4:** In case, following Rule 3, there are proposals in the same position, priority will be given to the total number of women in the team.

A maximum of three applications per challenge will move to the interview phase.

Step 5: Interview Stage

Up to 32 **highest-ranked startups** from the remote evaluation, after the normalisation process, will be invited to an online interview. The consortium will aim to ensure a balanced representation of the challenges.

The objective of this stage is to gain a deeper understanding of:

- The company's project concept.
- The startup's capacity to implement the project.
- The team's skills and competence.
- The woman's leadership.
- The strategic fit of the company in collaboration with the corporate partner.

These interviews will be conducted by a corporate member and by two external experts.

After the interview, the two external evaluators and the corporate partner will provide a yes/no decision on whether the proposal should advance, along with a brief written justification.

For every "yes" decision, 1 additional point will be added to the startup overall evaluation score.

6.2 Final Selection

At the end of the evaluation process, all proposals will be ranked based on their scores. In case of ties, the rules mentioned above will be followed. The best proposals will be invited to proceed with the legal validation, the signature of the sub-grantee agreement (see sub-grantee agreement template here) and participate in the programme.

Applicants whose proposals are deemed non-eligible or do not progress to the evaluation stage will be informed by the end of June 2026. All remaining results, including the final list of selected proposals following the interview stage, will be communicated around mid August 2026. All applicants will be informed of the evaluation results, receiving an evaluation summary report (ESR) via the Sploro platform. No information about the evaluation process will be disclosed before.

Please note that applicants selected for funding will not be permitted to modify the data or change the legal entity with which they originally applied.

6.3 Appealing procedure

The Open Horizons consortium recognises the importance of a fair and transparent evaluation process. Therefore, applicants who believe that a mistake or procedural error may have occurred during the assessment of their proposal, particularly one that could affect the outcome of the funding decision or eligibility status, may initiate an appeal under the following procedure:

- Appeals must be submitted **within five calendar days** of receiving the evaluation results. The request must include clear justification and any supporting evidence (e.g., screenshots, relevant documentation) that substantiates the claim.

- Upon receipt of a complete appeal, the Open Horizons team will review the matter to determine whether a reassessment is warranted. A formal response will be issued **within twenty calendar days**, provided all necessary information has been submitted. In the event of a delay, the applicant will be notified and given a revised timeline.
- If the review concludes that a re-evaluation is justified, the updated assessment will supersede the original outcome, without any further adjustments. This ensures swift resolution while maintaining procedural integrity.

Please note that **only one appeal per proposal** will be considered. The outcome of this process is final and will not be subject to further discussion.

6.4 Validation of the legal entity

Before finalising the list of accepted applicants, a thorough validation of the legal entities will be conducted. This process involves submitting various documents to ensure compliance with the Open Horizons programme's requirements.

To speed up the validation process it is highly recommended that the applicants validate their legal entity via the Funding & Tenders portal. To get validated you should refer to the official guide HERE.

The required documents for validation include:

- To validate the identity and the power of attorney of the person who will sign the sub-grantee, Open Horizons will ask for the **ID number and an ID scanned copy of the signatory**. On the scanned copy, personal information included on the ID card could be covered if not relevant for the contract signature, such as religion, ethnicity and/or personal address. The picture, expiry date, name, surname,

gender, number of the document and nationality should be visible without exception. Open Horizons will also ask for the **power of attorney** of the person who will sign the Sub-grantee agreement.

- **SME declaration (see** Annex 2**):** a form based on the standard templates by the EC in which Open Horizons can verify the ownership structure and financial figures to verify the size of the company.
- **Balance Sheet and P&L accounts** for the last two closed years (if applicable) and the most recent CAP table (shareholding distribution). In case the startup does not have two closed financial years, then we will require Balance Sheet and P&L accounts for the most recent financial year and predictions of next year. In companies with linked or associated entities, additional information (accounts for mother companies, group trees, etc.) could be requested.
- For entities that are already validated by the European Commission's Funding and Tenders Portal that have a registered and validated PIC Number, we will request:
    - The **PIC Number** (with the status being 'Validated') and a screenshot of the Funding and Tenders portal, in which it is evidenced that the type of organisation which has been selected as beneficiary is as required.
- For entities without a validated PIC number or a validated status (like self-declared SMEs), we will request:
    - The **PIC Number** (necessary in any case, even if the status is 'Declared')
    - **Legal entity form.** The Legal Entity form for private companies and public law bodies is necessary for the awarding of EU funding.
    - **Official company Registration document**, Statute, Official Journal and so forth, showing the name of the organisation, the legal address, registration number, company founders and shareholders necessary for the awarding of EU funding.

- **VAT/tax Number registration** a copy of a document proving VAT/tax registration (in case the VAT/tax number does not show on the registration extract or its equivalent).

A legal entity that does not provide the requested data and documents in due time will not be awarded.

At the same time, the Financial Identification Form (FIF) and back account validation documents will be requested:

- **Financial Identification Form (FIF)**: Form identifying the account to which the funds will be transferred, signed by the legal representative of the organisation.
- **Bank Statement (not older than 6 months)** showing the ownership of the account.

6.5 Sub-grantee agreement signature

Once the legal entity validation is completed, a formal sub-grantee agreement will be signed with the selected applicants. All legal aspects will be comprehensively addressed in the sub-grant agreement. This contract will include specific provisions arising from the Horizon Europe framework for cascading grants, details of the payment schedule and conditions (such as milestone achievements), and standard legal clauses outlining the rights and obligations of both the Open Horizons consortium and each sub-grantee, including matters related to intellectual property rights (IPR).

Only upon signing this agreement will beneficiaries gain full access to the Open Horizons programme services.

6.6 Ethical committees

The Open Horizons project itself does not directly develop or deploy deep-tech solutions, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), but plays a pivotal role in supporting startups that do. Recognizing the profound impact that AI can have on various stakeholders and the importance of ethical governance in its deployment, Open Horizons is committed to establishing ethical committees. These committees will provide crucial support and guidance to ensure that the AI technologies used by affiliated startups adhere to the highest standards of technical and social robustness. The ethical committees will be tasked with overseeing the development and implementation of AI systems to ensure they are accurate, reproducible, and capable of effectively managing failures or inaccuracies. Participation in the ethical committees' processes will be required for startups that are selected for support under the Open Horizons project. Startups developing or deploying AI-based solutions will be expected to cooperate by providing relevant documentation and engaging in periodic ethical reviews. This will ensure alignment with the project's standards on ethical AI deployment and enable tailored guidance for responsible innovation.

This oversight helps mitigate risks associated with AI deployment, ensuring that these technologies are reliable and function as intended while minimizing potential harm.

7. Rules and Conditions

7.1 Language

English is the only official language for the Open Horizons project. Submissions done in any other language will not be eligible and will not be evaluated. All communication and materials will be in English, and deliverables will only be accepted if they are in English.

7.2 Documents format

Unless otherwise stated in a specific question of the application form, any document requested in any phase of the selection process must be submitted electronically in **PDF format** without restrictions for printing.

7.3 Absence of conflict of interest

Applicants must ensure the absence of any actual or potential conflict of interest throughout both the Open Horizons selection procedure and the full duration of the project. A conflict of interest may arise in any situation where the impartiality of individuals involved in either the evaluation or project implementation could be compromised. Such situations may stem from financial stakes, personal ties, or any other circumstance that might impair objective judgment.

Each identified or suspected conflict of interest will be reviewed individually by the Open Horizons evaluation panel and relevant consortium members. Should an applicant be determined to have a conflict of interest, their application may be rejected.

Additionally, it should be emphasised that members of the Open Horizons consortium, including their affiliated organisations, staff, and long-term collaborators, are not eligible

to apply or receive financial support via the open call, in accordance with the rules established by the European Commission.

7.4 Data Protection

To process and evaluate applications, Open Horizons requires access to both personal and organisational data. SPLORO, acting as the open call coordinator, will serve as the Data Controller for all information submitted via the SPLORO platform in relation to this call.

The platform is fully compliant with the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR), ensuring a high standard of data protection and security. Consequently, all applicants must accept the SPLORO Platform terms to guarantee appropriate data handling and regulatory compliance.

For further details about SPLORO's data protection practices and implemented security measures, please consult their website: sploro.eu

8. Beneficiaries' responsibilities

The selected Open Horizons project organisations are indirectly beneficiaries of European Commission funding. As such, they are responsible for the proper use of the funding and ensure that the recipients comply with obligations under Horizon Europe's specific requirements. The obligations that apply to the recipients include:

8.1 Data protection and confidentiality

Throughout the implementation of the sub-project and for a period of 5 years following its conclusion, all parties are required to maintain strict confidentiality regarding any data, documentation, or other materials (in any format) designated as confidential at the time

of signing the sub-grant agreement. This obligation only applies to such information explicitly marked as "confidential".

8.2 Promotion of the action and EU Funding visibility

The beneficiary is required to actively communicate and promote their involvement in the Open Horizons project. Outreach should be strategically tailored to various audiences, including the public and media, and must highlight the support received from the European Union. The Open Horizons Communication Team will provide guidance, materials, and assistance to ensure these communication efforts are effective.

Unless otherwise agreed by the European Commission or the Open Horizons coordinator, or unless impossible under specific circumstances, any communication or publicity activity related to the project, whether through digital channels, social media, events, printed or audiovisual materials, must:

- Include the EU emblem,
- Include the Open Horizons logo.

The EU emblem should be prominently displayed when used alongside other logos. Its use does not grant any exclusive rights and remains subject to general rules on third-party usage, meaning it must not be misappropriated or registered as a trademark. No prior authorisation from the Commission is required under these conditions. More details on the correct use of the emblem can be found on the Europa website.

All communications made by the beneficiary must clearly state that the content reflects only the author's views and that neither the European Commission nor the Open Horizons consortium can be held responsible for any subsequent use of the information provided.

The European Commission and the Open Horizons consortium may publish, by any means and format, the following information:

- The name of the beneficiary;
- A general overview of the project;
- The amount of financial support planned and, after project completion, the final amount received;
- The geographical location of the project's activities;
- Records of dissemination activities and outputs;
- Publishable reports submitted by the beneficiary;
- Any multimedia content (photos, videos, web materials) provided during the project.

The beneficiary must ensure that all necessary rights and permissions are secured for such publications and that no third-party rights are infringed. In exceptional cases, and subject to approval from the Commission, the Open Horizons consortium may agree to withhold publication of specific information if its disclosure would jeopardise the beneficiary's security, academic or commercial interests.

8.3 Financial audits and control

The European Commission (EC) retains the right to oversee beneficiaries' adherence to the financial support. This oversight may include financial audits, which can be carried out either by EC departments or by external auditors acting on their behalf, including bodies such as the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF).

Beneficiaries are required to provide full access to all relevant records, data, and documentation requested for the purpose of such audits. Furthermore, all deliverables and supporting documents related to the sub-project must be retained by the beneficiary for a period of five years following the project's completion.

8.4 Internal communication

Every chosen Open Call project is required to designate a primary contact who will serve as the coordinator throughout the OC project's execution:

- Provide any notice in writing to the Open Horizon's coordinator.
- Notify immediately of any change of persons or contact details to the Open Horizons' coordinator.

8.5 External communication and open data

All organisations selected for funding under Open Horizons will be publicly listed through the project's communication channels, including its website, social media platforms, and any other relevant outlets identified by the consortium. Additionally, details of the financial support provided to each beneficiary will be published in a publicly accessible dataset, which will be uploaded to an open-access repository, such as Zenodo.